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'Not all gumnuts and outback': Exploring the attitudes of creative writing students towards Australian literature

Abstract
In Australia, laments for the dearth of Australian literature in both secondary school and university contexts have frequently surfaced in public debate, yet there has been less attention paid to student perspectives. This article discusses a small–scale survey undertaken with creative writing students enrolled in Contemporary Australian Writing *at RMIT University to capture their views about Australian literature. The results of this survey indicate that a hybrid approach based on techniques derived from both creative writing and literary studies appears to have a positive effect on the attitudes of students towards Australian literature.*
Keywords: Australian literature, creative writing, literary studies

> By far the greatest number of enrolments in English departments is in Creative Writing programmes. Who will study the writers when every student perceives himself as a writer? (Johnson 2013)

Introduction

Stephanie Johnson's novel *The Writing Class*, set in an unnamed Antipodean university, follows the fortunes of the members of a creative writing class over the course of one semester. Based loosely on her own experience as a teacher of creative writing, Johnson's narrative questions whether the rise of creative writing might have detrimental effects on the practices of traditional literary studies. In Australia, unsubstantiated laments for the dearth of Australian literature in both secondary school and university contexts have frequently surfaced, yet student voices are largely absent from public debate. As a teacher of Australian literature, I have become increasingly curious about the reluctance of students to read Australian literature. In 2011 I undertook a small-scale qualitative survey of students taking the *Contemporary Australian Writing* undergraduate course at RMIT University to reveal the 'texture' of student attitudes to Australian writing. The student voices from my survey are compared with selected responses of participants from the *Australian Writing Programs Network Final Report* (Webb et al 2008) and the *Australian Literature Teaching Survey Report* (Mead, Kilner & Healy 2010) to illuminate common themes. The results of my survey indicate that a hybrid approach based on techniques derived from both creative writing and literary studies appears to have a positive effect on student attitudes to Australian literature.

As many commentators have noted, neo-liberal market economies are increasingly putting pressure on the values that have sustained the ideals of public higher education (Brown & Carasso 2013, McGettigan 2013, Miller 2012, Tuchman 2009, Perloff 2004). Marjorie Perloff describes the humanities – and especially literary studies – 'as an embattled area, a field in crisis' (Perloff 2004: 13). Malcolm Gillies argues that the humanities 'need as many friends and links as possible' (Gillies 2009: 36). Undeniably, the humanities have experienced a downturn in prestige within managerial-orientated universities. Subjects such as English literature have been obliged to demonstrate their relevance in the current marketplace. Arguably, Australian literature holds an even more marginal position than its 'parent' discipline within the beleaguered humanities.

There has always been controversy about the study of Australian literature in universities. Initially this was due to the perceived illegitimacy of Australian literature as a scholarly subject. It took more than a hundred years for Australian literature to be established as a viable subject of study, at least within the two 'Oxbridge' universities of Sydney and Melbourne, founded in 1851 and 1854 respectively (Moore 2005: 93). In the 1920s, when the first students of English came through the universities, there were a few glimmers of interest in Australian literature. However, the 'Future of Australian Literature' debate which took place in the Melbourne *Age* in 1935 and the forum on 'Australian literature and the Universities' which ran in *Meanjin* throughout the 1950s revealed continuing ambivalence about the presence of Australian literature within the academy (Dale 1997: 40-44).

Until the mid-70s, David Carter notes, the inclusion of Australian literature in the English department was as an 'optional extra' (Carter 1997). In the 1970s and 1980s, Australian literature's struggle to secure an appropriate and continuing place in the offerings of Australian universities finally began to bear fruit (Hassall 2011). In 1982, the establishment of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) which merged with the Australian Literature Society (1899), helped to promote Australian literature in the universities, with a group of energetic academics championing its cause. As Kerryn Goldsworthy notes, 'ASAL had been formed in a spirit of embattled larrikin resistance to the mostly English (or Anglophile) professors who then dominated Australian university English departments, many of whom scorned the very notion of an Australian literature' (Goldsworthy 2013).

In the 2000s, debate has moved on from the appropriateness of Australian literature as a university subject, to a concern with the preservation of Australian literature courses in the face of their perceived diminution. The mid 2000s saw a series of pieces in the *Australian* newspaper about the apparent failure of universities to preserve Australian heritage through the teaching of Australian literature (Neill 2006; Holbrook 2006; Donnelly 2007; Ferrari 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). This is standard subject matter for the *Australian* which regularly runs 'cultural disaster stories' about the decline of national cultural values, with a special focus on the apparent lack of appreciation for Australian literature (Davis 2008). Ilyana Snyder (2008), Brenton Doecke, Mark Howie and Wayne Sawyer (2006), Brenton Doecke and Graham Parr (2005), and David Homer (2007) have all noted that a certain group of conservative journalists had been systematically 'waging war' on what they perceive as 'postmodernism', 'critical theory' and 'cultural studies' in classrooms for some time (McLean Davies 2008). Essentially these journalists have objected strenuously to any English teaching that involves theory, as opposed to the more 'wholesome' study of Australian classics.

The media coverage in the *Australian* in the period 2006-2007 was largely polemical and alarmist yet it prompted concerted action in the form of a masterclass for postgraduate students at the University of Sydney (2 February 2007) and a roundtable in Canberra by the Australia Council's Literature Board to discuss the future of Australian literature in education. The roundtable's communiqué recommended a 'survey of the current level of the teaching of literature in universities, in teacher training courses as well as in other undergraduate programs which should include a specific statement on Australian literature courses and on the staffing profile in Australian literature' (*Australia Council for the Arts* 2007). This recommendation eventually gave rise to the *Australian Literature Teaching Survey* (Mead, Kilner & Healy 2010). The communiqué also argued for a return to the teaching of traditional texts, claiming that 'classic works' and 'literary works of distinction' should 'form a prominent part of English in school and university curriculas' (*Australia Council for the Arts* 2007).

David Homer, Brenton Doecke and Mark Howie have all discussed the ways in which the roundtable served to apportion blame for a supposed decline in Australian literature rather than attempting to interrogate the validity of this claim in the first place (Doecke, Mead & McLean Davies 2011). The communiqué failed to acknowledge that 'embeddedness' of Australian literature across the arts curriculum means that Australian literature teaching is much harder to track, becoming less visible within universities though perhaps more widespread in a diffuse way.

In 2012, Ken Gelder used data derived from the AustLit database to argue against claims that the number of courses featuring Australian literature is shrinking: 'Australian literature is alive and well and taught right across the country. It is taught in more than 300 subjects in about 40 tertiary institutions' (Gelder 2012). There are no more up-to-date statistics available from AustLit at present, but the Office of Learning and Teaching has provided funding to the *Australian Literature Teaching Survey* team to build on their report through the collection of data on courses featuring Australian literature with results due in the near future.

Despite Gelder's defence of the state of Australian literature teaching, its perceived absence at the University of Melbourne was the driver for informal Australian literature classes organised by student Stephanie Guest. This development demonstrates that there is an unmet demand for Australian literature from students which has not always been satisfied by recent university offerings. In an article in the *Australian Book Review*, Guest accuses universities of failing to 'take Australian literature seriously' (Guest 2012: 37).

This course later evolved into an organisation named the Haplax School for Reading which continues the same work, albeit outside of the university. The establishment of Guest's course, and the media coverage it received, reignited conversation about the offerings of Australian literature within Australian universities, with many academics publically claiming that the situation is not as dire as it would seem. In the letters page of the *Australian Book Review* Barbara Creed from the University of Melbourne pointed out that universities have badged their subjects differently since the 1980s, with subject titles replacing generic titles such as 'Australian Literature' (*Australian Book Review* 2). In the same letters page Kevin Brophy observed that Australian literature in an Arts degree is not confined to English programs. It is pervasive in creative writing, one of the newer disciplines in the humanities (*Australian Book Review* 2).

Without current empirical data, it is impossible to know the 'true' state of Australian literature teaching but it is clear that creative writing courses are undergoing a boom period in Australia, as well as in other parts of the world. Commenting on the situation in the United States, Marc Bousquet observes that as English studies enter a period of decline, they will become increasingly reliant on what he calls 'the figure of writing' (Bousquet 2010: 117). With the long-term decline in the cultural capital of literature, Bousquet argues, English studies must collaborate or merge with other disciplines such as creative writing (Bousquet 2010: 118). Collaborations between creative writing and literary studies have traditionally been resisted in the United States, Mark McGurl argues, because creative writing discourse still displays 'not a commitment to ignorance, exactly, but…a commitment to innocence' (McGurl 2009: 74). Andrew Cowan observes that a certain 'unknowingness' is important to the practice of a creative writer. Cowan claims that any attempt to engage with critical concepts in the creative writing workshop, or an interrogation of its underlying ideological assumptions, threatens to stifle or subjugate the writing before the effort has even begun (Cowan 2011). Cowan suggests that studying critical theory in relation to texts can effectively undermine the creative writing done by students. This commitment to producing writing within a knowledge vacuum has meant that collaboration between creative writing and literary studies has been seen as problematic by practitioners from both disciplines.

In contrast to Cowan's position, Cassandra Atherton argues that complete ignorance of literary tradition can be quite detrimental to the writing of creative writing students (Atherton 2010). Atherton claims that creative writing and theory should be studied simultaneously because they 'invigorate one another'. Literary theory, Atherton notes, helps students to locate their work in a broader context and try to avoid repeating what has been done before (Atherton 2010). Taking a cue from Atherton, I argue that a cross-disciplinary approach, incorporating creative writing and literary studies, can re-energise creative writing students who are feeling jaded after previous contact with Australian literature.

Contemporary Australian Writing at RMIT University

Contemporary Australian Writing is a compulsory first year subject within the BA in Creative Writing at RMIT University which has been run since 2009. The cohort is predominantly composed of Australian-born school-leavers, with a very small representation of mature age students. In their first year of study, students are exposed to cinema studies, philosophy, literary studies, as well as *Contemporary Australian Writing*. In their second year of study, at the time of the study, students could choose either a screen-writing or novel-writing major, depending on their interest.

Designed as a literary studies course specifically for creative writing students, *Contemporary Australian Writing* brings together literary studies and creative writing practice. The course interprets the term 'writing' generously, with varied reading materials, including poems, novels, short stories, literary journals, a film, reviews and academic journal articles. Australian authors who were studied in 2011 were Tim Winton, Tom Cho, Cate Kennedy, Kim Scott, Kate Grenville, JM Coetzee and Nam Le. The texts were all selected with a view to interrogating received versions of 'Australian-ness' and exposing students to the diversity of contemporary Australian literature.

In order to explore the term 'contemporary' by contrast with 'heritage' literature, Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) was included on the reading list in 2011. As Jane Gleeson-White has argued, we should be 'reading and revitalising the "classics" by keeping them in conversation with other texts, with old texts overlooked, with new texts just published, texts which challenge them – texts from every part of our vibrant culture' (Gleeson-White 2012). In this way dialogue can be opened up between older and newer works, avoiding a shallow approach to contemporary literature that overlooks historical context.

Since I began teaching *Contemporary Australian Writing* in 2011, I have embraced the 'wreading' classroom model advocated by Charles Bernstein and others, including Brian Henry and Emily Carr in the USA and Felicity Plunkett in the Australian context. *Contemporary Australian Writing* uses the 'wreading' model to blend critical and creative reading and writing, encouraging students to interrogate texts from the 'inside', from their own writerly perspectives. The focus is on process rather than product, thinking about how texts are made rather than what they might mean (Carr 2011). Brian Henry advocates 'wreading' as an avenue for making creative work. 'Aside from being in itself a good thing' Henry argues, 'such reading demonstrates to students that they do not need to look only within to make something, that the ego and personal experience are not always necessary or sufficient for creating art' (Henry 2010: 133). Creative writing students may enter the class believing that all they need to write is their own life experience, and then they discover that critical reading can improve the quality of own literary productions.

To assist with the development of my teaching practice, I designed a small-scale qualitative, subjective questionnaire for students undertaking *Contemporary Australian Writing* in 2011. The intention was for this research to yield generalisable data, serving to illustrate some of the themes that were revealed in the *Australian Writing Programs Network Report* (2008) and the *Australian Literature Teaching Survey Report* (2010). At the time of devising the survey I was aware that it would not produce enough data to be comprehensive, given the size of the cohort. Instead I sought to capture student voices speaking frankly and anonymously about their encounters with Australian literature.

Felicity Plunkett has argued that 'in many cases, creative writing students are horrified when it is suggested to them that their prospective careers might make them part of Australian literature' (Plunkett 2011: 309). Having already observed this phenomenon, I asked the student respondents to undertake a writing exercise in Week 1. Students were asked to write a paragraph responding to the following question: 'Where do you fit within the Australian literary landscape?' This question was asked in order to establish their current relationship with Australian literature before undertaking the coursework for *Contemporary Australian Writing*,which might be expected to have an impact on their perceptions of Australian literature.

Intended as a 'warm-up' before the larger survey, this exercise was also included in the ethics clearance provided by RMIT University. In line with ethics regulations, all student responses are reported here using pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants. Designed to capture information about student attitudes to Australian literature, the question elicited a range of responses, from negative to neutral. Charlie had a markedly negative attitude towards Australian literature at the start of semester: 'I don't really like novels set in Australia, which centre on Australian culture and prefer to read about landscapes completely unfamiliar to me'. Jessica wrote that Australian literature holds little interest because 'as a native Australian, I find Australian-

ness to be wholly normal, not worth noticing'. Similarly Frank said, 'most Australian literature I have read has focused on capturing a realistic portrait of Australian life. However I write in order to escape from reality'. This was a common theme amongst respondents, with several commenting that they preferred fantasy to reality when reading and writing. These responses, and other similar ones, revealed that many students read literature for escapism, not for the 'gritty reality' that many students associated with 'traditional' Australian literature as they might have experienced it previously, at school and/or university.

In Week 11 of the semester, a survey composed of seven questions was distributed to students in *Contemporary Australian Writing* during the two tutorials. There were approximately 28 responses to the questionnaire, although not all fields were completed. There are 50 students enrolled in the course but only 28 present in tutorials on the week it was distributed, leading to a lower than expected response rate.

The survey began by asking students to provide information about their own creative writing to find out more about their literary preferences. Respondents listed a wide range of descriptors when asked to categorise their writing in terms of genre. Terms included 'hysterical realism', 'young adult life fiction', 'fantastical realism', 'Australian fiction' and 'post-apocalyptic'. Nathan wrote that he was not sure how to categorise his writing but did not expect the course to 'clarify it' for him. Interestingly two students used 'realism' as a descriptor, albeit with a qualifying prefix such as 'hysterical' or 'fantastical'. Despite the commonly expressed aversion to Australian realism by this cohort, 'realism' appears to be a significant feature of their own writing.

The next question required respondents to comment on the settings used in their writing, to ascertain whether Australian locations were featured. The cohort was fairly evenly split with eight students saying that they use Australian settings in their writing, while nine students explicitly said they do not. Four students indicated that they might use Australian settings sometimes. A number of respondents mentioned 'the bush', 'the outback' and 'rural communities' as being of interest to them in terms of locations for their writing, with only one person mentioning 'urban' settings. Nathan claimed, 'I prefer to set my work in generic-esque places that could be anywhere'. Max observed, 'I'm not really good at deciding setting, so I usually just keep it a mystery'. This sentiment is echoed by other respondents, including Wendy who indicated that she 'made the towns universal on purpose so as to not alienate international audiences'. The preference for the sci-fi genre appeared in a few responses including the comment by Finn, 'generally no concrete real-world location'. Richard wrote that 'more often my stories are set in entirely fictional locations but a few have been set in Australia. I like the "weird melancholy" aspect of the Australian setting and am trying to apply that to one of my current projects'. The respondents were divided on the issue of settings, with some articulating a desire to write about their country while others were apprehensive about the possible limitations of using Australian locations, if they sought overseas publication.

In order to learn more about how their previous experience might have shaped their perceptions, students were asked whether they had studied Australian literature before. Twelve students had studied Australian literature before, while twelve had not. Eight students described their previous experience as negative and only two described it as positive, while two students neither liked it nor disliked it. In the very first question, the majority of students revealed that they had not enjoyed their previous exposure to Australian literature at school. Several respondents indicated that their experiences of Australian

literature at school were unpleasant. Charlie said 'it was very negatively influential because the books were awful'. Jessica described the experience as 'horrible' because 'the novel we studied was on rural Australia'. Frank characterised the Australian literature texts they had studied for VCE as 'creatively dry and unsatisfying'. The most extreme response was from Adam who described the experience of studying Australian literature at school as 'akin to dropping a toaster in my bath tub'. This response certainly indicates the student's distaste for Australian literature yet it does not explain exactly how his attitude originally formed.

When asked about the writing they liked or disliked during the course, some students indicated that they were glad that the Australian literature in the course was not taught in a 'stereotypical' manner. Mitchell wrote, 'I liked that it wasn't all gumnuts and outback'. Bradley expressed his interest in the discussion of Australian culture in relation to Australian literature: 'I liked the discussion around the cultural cringe, what it means to write Australian literature'. Fiona reiterated this theme, saying that she had not studied 'the culture of Australian literature before'. Adam, who expressed very negative thoughts about the Australian literature he had studied in the past, said that the guest lecturers who contributed to *Contemporary Australian Writing* helped to alleviate his 'prejudice'. Courtney argued for the importance of the course since 'we are all writing in Australia, it's important to look at what's out and about in the literary community of Australia'. The majority of respondents indicated that their perceptions of Australian literature had been altered by the end of the course, with some claiming that it was less clichéd or stereotypical than expected. A number of respondents claimed that they had encountered authors and ideas that they would like to investigate further.

The issue of canon-formation and the obligation to read classic works also arose in student responses. Interrogating the value of the Australian canon, Billy commented:

> I like the variety of writing we have studied, particularly because it has dispelled some stereotypes of Australian literature I have had, including that 'good' Australian writing is all about the bush, and white Australians etc. I dislike the fact that perhaps some of the authors we have studied are less talented writers (in my opinion) but they are accepted within the canon of Australian writing, hence we study them.

Here, Billy seems to have an unclear concept of what a canon might be, since none of the works on the course could be considered canonical except Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*. Nevertheless, his comment reveals his belief that 'lesser' texts have been included on the course simply because they are Australian, rather than being works that would hold their own alongside the best literature that the world has to offer.

While the Australia Council Literature Board's roundtable recommended an increase in the numbers of classic Australian texts, these students' responses indicate that an emphasis on canonical works can discourage learners. John Kinsella believes that a rigid fixation on an Australian canon actually does a disservice to Australian literature: 'to have a literary heritage declared, embodied as essential, is stifling in so many ways' (Kinsella 2012). Rather than adopting a gatekeeping role, that dictates exactly what students should read, Kinsella argues that teachers ought to encourage students to regard Australian literature with flexibility and openness (Kinsella 2012). Similarly, a student responding to the *Australian Literature Teaching Survey* wishes that 'we were encouraged to dive in at whatever point interests us' instead of 'reading

through the "boring" older Aust lit … before you can really understand the current culture' (Mead, Kilner & Healy 2010: 60). Therefore, it seems that a chronological approach is less appealing to students who would rather have the option to study texts in whichever order suits them best. Presumably there is more scope for this in a university course such as *Contemporary Australian Writing* than in a secondary school English classroom where there are many more institutional and temporal constraints.

The aforementioned students, Billy and the anonymous respondent to the *Australian Literature Teaching* survey, both find the obligation to study 'canonical', or 'heritage' Australian literature onerous, indicating their desire for more choice in the writing they study. A number of respondents cited in the ALTS Report claimed that they were unimpressed by 'the minimal amount of choice in Australian literature units' (Mead, Kilner & Healy 2010: 60). Australian literature's marginal status within the humanities might be seen as an unfortunate side effect of the lack of choice of reading materials.

To gauge whether it is possible to change strong opinions about the value of reading Australian literature, students were asked if their impressions of Australian literature had shifted during the course. This question elicited divided responses with sixteen respondents replying yes and ten saying no. Significantly, more students believed that their attitudes to Australian literature had been altered by their specific course and the texts they encountered. Alice replied that she did not really have any impressions beforehand, having not previously studied Australian literature, but was 'pleasantly surprised'. Adam wrote, 'now I feel mild interest towards it as opposed to suicidal tendencies'. Charlotte said that her impression had 'not so much shifted, but areas have been discussed that I would like to further investigate'. Meanwhile Georgia observed: 'I think I've forced myself to ask 'Why?' with a lot of my conceptions of Aus Lit. I've become more open to exploring Australian novels'. Mark claimed that he was 'petrified' to write an Australian novel as 'the Australian fiction genre is so thoroughly scrutinised'. After reading and critiquing Australian literature it appears that some students became more sensitive to the ways in which their writing could be received. Since the survey, students have also complained of experiencing a sense of 'self-consciousness' about their writing after formally studying Australian writing.

The final question in the surveyasked students whether they read Australian literature in their leisure time to elicit information about their reading preferences. Eight students responded that they read some Australian literature outside of their university study while nine students said they did not. Many respondents could not recall any names of Australian authors they had read, possibly indicating that it has been some time since they read Australian literature for leisure. Meredith said that she did not read Australian literature before taking the course but was now working her way through Tom Cho's *Look Who's Morphing*, a text that was studied during the course. Jim answered, 'yes, I'm going to further look into the writing of JM Coetzee', revealing that his interest had been piqued. Favourite authors' names that were mentioned more than once included: JM Coetzee, Peter Carey, Tom Cho, Kate Morton, Jackie French and John Marsden. The breadth of responses showed that many students prefered to read young adult and/or 'popular' literature. A few students were critical of the selection of texts on the reading list and made recommendations for improvement.

To summarise, it appears that many students felt that Australian settings were limiting to their work, particularly if they wanted to reach global audiences. Yet most did acknowledge the benefits of studying Australian literature for their creative writing practice, even if their fictions were not set in Australia. Twelve

students felt that knowledge of Australian literature was important to their creative writing practice, four said that it was not important, and a further four students indicated that they were undecided. Two respondents replied that they felt they needed to be familiar with what was out there to know 'what they are up against'. Brendan replied, 'if I am published I will be part of this club', indicating that he sees Australian writers as members of the same exclusive group.

Meanwhile, Richard argued that a knowledge of Australian literature was 'not particularly important' since he felt 'more allegiance to my genre than to any geographical decision. On the other hand, this course has inspired me to think more about how to draw on my Australian background in my writing'. This point seems to indicate that while previous preferences have not been completely altered by the course, it may have afforded new insights. Billy articulately observed that knowledge of Australian literature is important for understanding the local context but that it was not vital for his own writing:

> In terms of creative practice, however, I will find my inspiration from what I like, and Australian literature as a whole (though my knowledge of it is limited) is not a current source of inspiration for me (with the exception of a few writers, though they are not my primary source of inspiration at the present time).

This comment suggests that while knowledge of Australian literature is helpful to provide a sense of perspective, it may not be the central source of inspiration for creative writers who eschew geographical limitations.

When teaching Australian literature, Brenton Doecke argues, 'it is more productive to focus on those points of tension or difference which the notion of "Australianness" has often been used to conceal' (Doecke 2011: 14-24). One of the aims of *Contemporary Australian Writing* is to expand the boundaries of Australian literature, by including figures such as South African-born JM Coetzee and the expatriate Christina Stead, along with writing by Asian-Australian writers such as Nam Le and Tom Cho. Some student respondents were especially attracted to the diversity of contemporary Australian writing they read during the course. Sara commented that she would like to

> write more stories about emerging cultural clashes that occur in multicultural Australia, the merging of identities and metanarratives that are created out of this, specifically in regards to my own cultural history. I don't think there is a specifically Australian voice to Australian writing. At least not always.

Sara acknowledged that the field of Australian literature is increasingly varied, not the 'dull' monocultural entity it may seem to some readers. When teaching Australian literature, Mandy Treagus has argued 'the discourses of the past need to be acknowledged', but 'they do not have to dominate our sense of nationhood… We can build a new sense of nation around another narrative, that of inclusion' (Treagus 1999: 21). The reading list for *Contemporary Australian Writing* aims for a 'narrative of inclusion', while recognising the impossibility of representing all dimensions of contemporary Australian identity.

If the findings of this small survey are read alongside the larger *ALT* survey, it becomes clear that Australian literature has an image problem amongst students, especially school-leavers. The ALTS Reportquotes a tertiary teacher of Australian literature who observes 'direct feedback from students indicates

[that] they expect Australian texts to be dry, boring, obsessed with national identity and Australian history, and set in the bush' (Mead, Kilner & Healy 2010: 63). Another teacher noted that students find Australian literature 'boring' and that it does not 'relate' to students' experiences, and 'the medicine approach turns them off traditional disciplines (e.g. read this, it's good for you)' (2010: 30). Through my own survey, I also observed that the 'medicine approach' is counter-productive in terms of the students' long-term perceptions of Australian literature. For this reason, the fact that *Contemporary Australian Writing* is a compulsory course can be off-putting for students who have felt coerced into reading Australian literature in the past. Given the wealth of assumptions brought to the classroom, it is imperative to acknowledge and scrutinise negative responses and prejudices in order to open the way for more positive, playful engagement with local texts.

Although it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from such a small survey, the *Contemporary Australian Writing* student respondents were almost unanimously in favour of an open approach to the study of Australian literature. In their responses, the students were very forthcoming in terms of their preferences in writing and their perceptions of what Australian literature might be. As expected, the survey illustrated some of the broader themes discussed in the AWPN report and the ALTS report and gave voice to the participants' experiences of Australian literature. The survey data demonstrated the reluctance of many students within the cohort to study Australian literature but was not able to elicit in-depth information about the sources of their attitudes. Some students indicated that it was due to prior experience at school however there was not enough detail provided to draw any firm conclusions. There may be a number of factors contributing to these responses such as lack of text choice, rigid assessment frameworks or inherited prejudice against Australian material. The various elements contributing to unpleasant reading experiences need to be explored further in future studies.

At universities such as RMIT and the University of Canberra, literary studies is already beginning to productively collaborate with creative writing, demonstrating that the two disciplines can be productively integrated. Pedagogical practices are yet to be fully developed, allowing scope for all kinds of innovations. As the *Contemporary Australian Writing* survey shows, the student experience of Australian literature can be improved through a flexible approach that incorporates techniques from both disciplines. In answer to Stephanie Johnson's question: 'Who will study the writers when every student perceives himself as a writer?', I would argue that students will continue to study the work of Australian authors at university but they will need to be engaged as writers as well as readers.

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